Early Businessman and Opera House Manager J. E. Eddy

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John Edward Eddy played an essential role in early Fairbury history. His story began with his father, Stephen Eddy, born in Orcieres, Switzerland, in 1821. At the age of 28, Stephen decided to emigrate from Switzerland to America in 1849. The ocean voyage across the Atlantic took 22 days to reach New York City. After getting to America, he went to Wisconsin and worked for two months without pay. He then traveled to Chicago and walked to Ottawa. In 1856, Stephen married Mary Lucile Tritley. Around 1958, Stephen and Mary Eddy moved to a farm southeast of Fairbury. Stephen and Mary Eddy had seven children. In 1890, at the age of 69, Stephen Eddy retired from farming and moved into Fairbury. He lived to be 83 years old and was buried in Saint Johns Catholic Cemetery north of Fairbury.

James E. Harrington was born in 1829 near the city of Westport in County Mayo, Ireland. In that era, potatoes were the primary food crop grown in Ireland. In 1845, a blight disease wiped out all the potato crops. This lead to four years of mass starvation, where over one million people died. Another one million people emigrated to other countries to escape famine and disease. The population of Ireland fell by 25 percent. Americans refer to this event as the Irish Potato Famine.

James E. Harrington, at the age of 20, decided to escape from the famine and emigrate to America. His ocean voyage in 1849 from Ireland to Mobile, Alabama, took eight weeks. After reaching Mobile, he left by riverboat for Cincinnati, Ohio. When he arrived at Cincinnati, he discovered that 8,000 people had died from a cholera epidemic. James secured employment as a farmhand 16 miles away from the city to escape the cholera outbreak.

James was paid $72 for his first year working as a farmhand. He sent $60 of his pay to his widowed mother in Ireland. James worked eight more years as a farmhand in Ohio. He worked for three different farmers, and his salary ranged from $6 to $15 a month. James continued to send money to his mother in Ireland and saved some money to buy his own farm.

In 1853, James Harrington married Bridget McGreal. They left Ohio in a covered wagon and traveled for 17 days until they reached what is now Fairbury. They made their covered wagon trip just a couple of months before the new Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border. James and his brother Edward Harrington farmed land they rented southwest of Fairbury. In 1860, James Harrington purchased a 40-acre farm in Indian Grove Township.

James and Bridget Harrington built a house on the 40-acre farm. The walls of this new house were plastered the same day Abraham Lincoln was elected, November 6, 1860.

James bought more farmland in 1871 in Yates Township. In 1888, James Harrington retired from farming and moved to Fairbury. James and Bridget Harrington had six children. James Harrington died in 1911 at the age of 82. James was buried in Saint Johns Catholic Cemetery north of Fairbury.

The Eddy family and the Harrington family became connected through marriage in 1894. John Edward Eddy was the 25-year-old son of Stephen and Mary Eddy. Miss Bridget Ellen "Nellie" Harrington was the 20-year-old daughter of James and Bridget Harrington. The marriage of J.E. Eddy and Nellie Harrington connected two of the oldest families in Fairbury. John and Nellie Eddy had two children in Fairbury. Marie Irene Eddy was born in 1895, and Willard J. Eddy was born in 1901.

J.E. Eddy initially was in the hardware, plumbing, and tinning business. From 1891 until 1902, T.G. Henderson was his business partner. Eventually, Mr. Eddy bought out his partner and purchased a building at the northwest corner of Locust and Fifth Streets from Thomas A. Beach. Several old photographs still exist illustrating J.E. Eddy's hardware store at that corner.

In 1917, Mr. Eddy bought the old Opera House next door from Phil Wade. This building was located where Steidinger Meats is now located. It was a three-story building that was called several different names. It was dedicated in 1871 and was initially called the Fairbury Hall. Initially, many prominent “free thinker” guest speakers spoke from the stage at the north end of the second floor. A regular meeting was held every Sunday.

Mr. Eddy renamed the Opera House to Eddy's Hall. In the era, Eddy's Hall was a primary source of entertainment in Fairbury. The upstairs was used for roller-skating, parties, and dances. The upper floor was also used as a basketball court for the enormously popular Bon Ton Limits men's basketball team. The basketball team was sponsored by the Bon Ton drug store in Fairbury. Some of the most well-known basketball players included John Joda and Carl Goudy.

In March of 1920, brothers Oscar and Walter Nussbaum bought out the plumbing business from J. E. Eddy. They named their new company Nussbaum Bros. and that firm lasted for over 50 years in Fairbury. After selling his plumbing business, Mr. Eddy retained ownership of Eddy's Hall.

By 1935, J.E. Eddy was 67 years old and had been a Fairbury businessman for more than 40 years. While working at Eddy's Hall, he suffered a stroke. Friends took Mr. Eddy to his home at 300 East Maple Street, where he passed away. Mr. Eddy was buried in Saint Johns Catholic Cemetery north of Fairbury.

J.E. Eddy was a very well-known Fairbury businessman. He provided a hardware store and plumbing services for many years. Mr. Eddy provided entertainment to Fairbury citizens at Eddy's Hall. His funeral was one of the largest ever conducted in Fairbury. All Fairbury businesses closed during the funeral services.

J.E. Eddy (1868-1935)
Fairbury Businessmen and Opera House Manager